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RUSSIA: Religion, schools and the right to choose

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org/>)

Russian state schools offer sharply different interpretations of the religion and ethics course introduced in September 2012, Forum 18 News Service notes in a comprehensive analysis of the current situation. In one Siberian school, only the Orthodox Culture module was offered as a headteacher claimed "we live in an Orthodox country". Yet a teacher in a different school tried to convey to pupils that "we may believe in different religions but we should respect one another". This inconsistency on the ground could result in violations of freedom of religion or belief anywhere in Russia. Unlike the initial version proposed by the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), pupils may choose one module from six on Secular Ethics, Foundations of World Religious Cultures, Foundations of Orthodox, Islamic, Jewish or Buddhist Culture. Most parents and pupils do not favour instruction in the Russian Orthodoxy of the Patriarchate in state schools. (Orthodox Old Believer churches have recommended either Secular Ethics or Foundations of World Religious Cultures.) The most common module choice is Secular Ethics.

Absent since the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, tuition on religion is once again being offered in Russia's state schools, Forum 18 News Service notes. Its introduction follows many years' lobbying by the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) for school pupils to study Orthodoxy.

But what does the subject introduced in September 2012 mean for freedom of religion or belief? The main textbooks - examined by Forum 18 - are mostly even-handed. Unlike the initial version of the subject proposed by the Moscow Patriarchate, pupils may choose one module from six on Secular Ethics, Foundations of World Religious Cultures, Foundations of Orthodox, Islamic, Jewish or Buddhist Culture.

Visiting three neighbouring Siberian regions in recent months, however, Forum 18 found sharply different interpretations of the subject. In Khakassia Republic, one Lutheran parent complained his daughter was offered only the Orthodox Culture module after the school's headteacher proclaimed, "We live in an Orthodox country". Yet in Buryatia Republic, a teacher of the subject is trying to convey to her pupils that, "We may believe in different religions but we should respect one another."

Forum 18 concludes from this inconsistency on the ground that the subject could result in violations of freedom of religion or belief anywhere in Russia.

In this analysis of the situation at the end of 2013, Forum 18 has seen all relevant laws, schoolbooks and official documents unless another source is given.

What the law says

A raft of legal changes in 2012-13 formalised tuition of religious studies in all Russia's state schools, Forum 18 notes.

Previous post-Soviet laws on the issue continued strict separation of religious organisations and state education. The 1992 Education Law upheld the secular nature of state education and prohibited the creation or activity of religious organisations within state educational institutions (Article 2, Part 4; Article 1, Part 5). The 1997 Religion Law permitted religious instruction on state school premises – including by religious organisations – but only outside the framework of the educational curriculum and with pupils' and parents' consent (Article 5, Part 4).

The December 2012 Education Law and an associated July 2013 Law amending the 1997 Religion Law (among others) supersede these earlier provisions. While continuing to affirm the secular nature of state education, the 2012 Law does not specifically bar religious organisations' involvement in it. The same law prohibits teachers from "using educational activity (..) to force students to accept or renounce (..) religious or other convictions" - but this falls short of prohibiting promotion of a particular religious or other worldview (Article 48, Part 3).

The associated July 2013 Law amends the 1997 Law to permit religious worship on "premises belonging to educational organisations that were used for religious worship historically" (Article 50, Part 4 amending Article 16, Part 3). As most Russian school buildings date from the anti-religious Soviet period and do not have such premises, this is a much narrower category than

originally sought. The August 2012 draft version of the law had tried to amend this provision to allow religious worship at any state educational institution simply at the request of pupils' parents (Article 48, Part 4).

The key change concerning religion brought by the 2012 Education Law, however, is a legal framework for the school subject Foundations of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics, introduced nationwide in September 2012.

Announcing the introduction of the subject in February 2012, then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin suggested that "well-trained theologians, priests" should teach it, according to a transcript on his presidential campaign website. The 2012 Education Law makes no reference to tuition by clerics, however. A Booklet for Parents produced in conjunction with the six main textbooks for the subject insists that history, civics and other humanities teachers will teach the subject, not clerics.

The 2012 Law does permit tuition on "the spiritual-moral culture of the peoples of the Russian Federation; moral principles; the historical and cultural traditions of world religions or alternative subjects" (Article 87, Part 1). It also stipulates that relevant course material is subject to analysis by a corresponding centralised religious organisation "to ascertain whether its content conforms with the teachings, historical and cultural traditions of the organisation" (Article 87, Part 3). Such organisations are also to be involved in preparation of teaching materials (Article 87, Part 6).

Forum 18 notes this wording allows the state to choose organisations with which it has closer relations - such as the Moscow Patriarchate and particular Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist bodies – to give their preferred explanations of Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism, potentially at the expense of alternative trends such as Old Belief, Protestantism or Reform Judaism.

On 18 October 2013 Russia's Supreme Court rejected a challenge to the introduction into state schools of Foundations of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics, according to a decision by Judge Valentina Yemysheva on the Court's website. Dmitri Bondar – who did not appear in court and asked for the case to be heard in his absence – argued that the subject's introduction violated the 1993 constitutional guarantee to freedom of religion or belief. Judge Yemysheva countered that pupils may choose from six options spanning different religious cultures and Secular Ethics.

In practice, however, not all schools are able – or willing – to offer all six options, Forum 18 has found (see below).

Most choose Secular Ethics

Despite continued criticism by the Moscow Patriarchate, the course is a much-diluted form of the type of state religious instruction the Patriarchate has lobbied for from the start of discussions. The Patriarchate long tried to introduce instruction in its branch of Russian Orthodoxy – also under the title Foundations of Orthodox Culture – into state schools at local level. However, this came to an abrupt halt in September 2007, when President Putin chose his visit to Belgorod Region – the region that had gone furthest by introducing compulsory Orthodox Culture classes for all pupils – to stress Russia's constitutional separation of Church and state (see F18News 14 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1021).

In December 2007 Putin went on to abolish the right of local authorities to determine a portion of the school curriculum, a practice that had allowed the Patriarchate to introduce Orthodox tuition piecemeal at regional level.

It is now clear that most parents and pupils do not favour instruction in the Russian Orthodoxy of the Moscow Patriarchate in state schools. Even when introduced by the state as an elective, culturological subject, Foundations of Orthodox Culture was chosen by only 28 percent of parents and pupils across most of Russia. Forty-one percent preferred Secular Ethics and 20 percent Foundations of World Religious Cultures in the 77 (of 83) Russian regions that had completed the selection process when results were reported by Itar-Tass news agency in March 2012. Five percent chose Foundations of Islamic Culture, one percent Buddhist Culture and only 0.1 percent Jewish Culture.

The subject was previously piloted over two years in 19 Russian regions in line with an October 2009 government decree. Then President Dmitri Medvedev announced its introduction at a high-profile meeting with Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist leaders in July 2009. Again, parents and pupils preferred Secular Ethics in the majority of pilot regions. This option proved first choice in Kaliningrad, Kamchatka, Krasnoyarsk, Kurgan, Novosibirsk, Penza, Sverdlovsk (Yekaterinburg) and Tomsk Regions, as well as Udmurtia Republic, according to results published by Gazeta.ru in March 2010.

Foundations of Orthodox Culture proved first choice in Chuvashia Republic, Jewish Autonomous Region, Kostroma, Stavropol, Tambov, Tver and Vologda Regions. Foundations of Islamic Culture came first in Chechnya and Karachay-Cherkessia Republics, as did Foundations of Buddhist Culture in Kalmykia Republic – the three remaining pilot regions where these non-Orthodox "traditional" religions are dominant. Outside these three, tuition on Islamic, Jewish or Buddhist Culture was reportedly chosen by a maximum of only two percent.

What's in the course?

At least on paper, Foundations of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics is a great improvement over some of the forced religious

instruction reported in some Russian regions before 2009, Forum 18 notes (see below).

First published in Rossiiskaya Gazeta newspaper in March 2012, a December 2011 Education Ministry decree approved 10 titles as textbooks for the subject. Six of these – one for each module of the subject – are those produced under Ministry supervision for the 2010-11 pilot scheme. Since the three on Secular Ethics, Foundations of World Religious Cultures and Foundations of Orthodox Culture are by far the most commonly used, Forum 18 focuses on their content here.

In his introduction to the Booklet for Parents accompanying the six textbooks, Education Minister Andrei Fursenko maintains that the aims of the subject are "the moral education of Russian pupils on the basis of traditional ideals and common human values (...) the formation of a respectful attitude towards the different views and convictions of the citizens of our large country (...) consequently, a healthier moral atmosphere in society".

Embodying this goal of social cohesion, pupils following separate modules are to take part in joint activities at the end of the course to mark Russia's National Unity Day on 4 November. This, the Booklet suggests, "can become a school and family holiday and take place under the slogan, 'We're different, but we're together'."

Similarly, all six textbooks open with two chapters by pedagogue Aleksandr Danilyuk emphasising "love and respect for the Fatherland" as an umbrella ideology of unity. Orthodoxy is not given precedence here: the presence of Judaism and Islam on Russia's modern-day territory from the seventh and eighth centuries respectively is noted, and only then the Orthodox conversion of the early medieval state of Rus in 988.

Described by the Booklet for Parents as "an introduction to the system of humanist values", the anonymous textbook on Secular Ethics makes no reference to religion, even where context might suggest it. In a lesson on "the golden rule of morality", for example, well-known sources for the maxim "Do as you would be done by" are given as the Chinese philosopher Confucius, the Greek mathematician Thales and the Roman philosopher Seneca, but not the New Testament commandment "Do to others what you would have them do to you" [Matt. 7:12].

In general, the textbook sees Secular Ethics as rooted in philosophy, as when suggesting that Aristotle founded ethics, "a science that considers actions and human relations from the point of view of ideas about good and evil".

Despite the patriotic tone of Danilyuk's opening and closing chapters, the Secular Ethics textbook is not politicised, instead introducing concepts such as conscience, friendship and etiquette. A chapter on patriotism makes no reference to Russia's present regime, noting only that, "without the patriotism of all [its] peoples Russia could not have been victorious in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-5." While concerned exclusively with behaviour, the textbook is also not particularly didactic. It suggests, for example, that if a person prefers to live exclusively in accordance with their own desires, "that person must then be prepared to be shunned by those around him, who will not wish to befriend or love him".

Another feature of the Secular Ethics textbook unintentionally preventing it being forced moral instruction is its complexity. While some passages are easy to understand, they quickly become complex for 10- and 11-year-old pupils, as when quoting Hegel: "In order for an action to have moral value, it should be linked to one's personal conviction. It is amoral to do something due to fear of punishment or in order to win the approval of others."

Different Orthodoxies

The author of the textbook in the same series on Foundations of Orthodox Culture is Protodeacon Andrei Kurayev, who remains influential in the Moscow Patriarchate despite his controversial dismissal from a teaching position at Moscow Spiritual Academy in December 2013.

Throughout his textbook, Kurayev alternates between a neutral, culturological attitude – as when beginning statements with "Christians believe that" – and religious instruction: "If a person is communicating online and then his computer breaks down, does the person's disappearance from the internet mean he's dead? In the same way, the breakdown of the body doesn't destroy the soul." Unlike the other textbooks, its many illustrations of Orthodox art and architecture bear little relation to the text – for Kurayev focuses on the moral content of Orthodoxy.

While Kurayev's textbook does not mention non-Orthodox Christian or other religious beliefs, several features – such as a photograph identifying Kirill as patriarch and the identification of Metropolitan Filaret (Drozdov) of Moscow (d. 1867) as a saint – are unacceptable to Old Believers. Aleksei Muravyev, director of studies at the Moscow seminary of the Russian Orthodox Old Believer Church (Belokrinitsa Concord), pointed out to Forum 18 in September 2010 that Old Believers remember Filaret as encouraging state persecution of their faithful.

Consequently, December 2009 and May 2010 Councils of the priestless Pomorye Old Believer Church and the Russian Old Orthodox Church (Novozybkov Concord) recommended that Old Believer parents choose Secular Ethics or Foundations of World Religious Cultures instead of Foundations of Orthodox Culture, according to the Churches' websites.

Old Believer Muravyev has since written his own textbook on Foundations of Orthodox Culture, published in 2013 and approved by the Education Ministry. All but a few of its many illustrations could pertain to Old Belief as well as the Moscow Patriarchate, and there is no discussion of saints or events after the seventeenth-century schism between the two. The text is more culturological than Kurayev's, as when explaining festivals with reference to images of particular icons.

It also notes that Russians may be Muslims, Buddhists, Jews or "representatives of other Christian confessions – Catholics and Protestants", and does not interpret this variation as division: "All religions teach goodness and truth in their own way. But peace did not always reign between adherents of different religions. They often argued about which of them better expresses the main Truth (...) [But] religious arguments do not result from people's hatred. On the contrary, they show that the truth of faith is very important and valuable to people."

While focusing on the four faiths "considered the traditional religions of Russia", the main textbook for Foundations of World Religious Cultures notes that "representatives of Western Christian confessions made a great contribution to Russia's cultural development." Elsewhere, forms of religious practice identified as Christian – such as baptism and the Eucharist – are taken from Orthodoxy. Many Protestants would not accept other practices included, such as pilgrimage. In general, however, the textbook is firmly culturological, treating aspects of the different faiths together in thematic chapters, such as on art, architecture, charity and festivals.

Mixed guidance for teachers

Also accompanying the main six textbooks, a 240-page Book for Teachers by numerous authors has sections on the historical and current religious situation in Russia, as well as encyclopaedic entries on different religions and Secular Ethics. Its tone is contradictory.

Parts of the book favour Russia's so-called "traditional" religions of Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism, as when noting that, "in recent years the population of the country has begun to regard religious trends that are non-traditional for Russia more negatively." It also maintains that Orthodoxy is "the most important form of Eastern Christianity". Such bias is sometimes explicitly for religious organisations enjoying more positive relations with the Kremlin. The section on Judaism, for example, names only Berel Lazar as Chief Rabbi of Russia (Adolf Shayevich is a rival Chief Rabbi).

The book also follows Moscow Patriarchate rhetoric by describing how "supporters of the uniate [Eastern-rite Catholic] church also seized Orthodox churches in Ukraine" while omitting to mention that the Soviet authorities confiscated these churches from Eastern-rite Catholics - with Patriarchate backing – in 1946.

Other parts of the Book for Teachers are neutral or highly complimentary about minority religious communities, however. Impartial information is included on the True Orthodox Church, which broke away from the established Russian Orthodox Church due to the latter's 1927 declaration of loyalty to the Soviet regime. The Council of Churches Baptists is similarly said to have broken away from the main Soviet Baptist Union in 1961 "not wishing to be under the harsh control of the state organs". In general, Baptists are described as "law-abiding" and "very tolerant", while Pentecostals are said to "support traditional Christian views of the family" and to have "a high moral standard". High morality is also described as characteristic of Islam: "A Muslim avoids deceit and is very patient."

Occasionally, the Book for Teachers appears confused as to which tone to take, as in one paragraph beginning, "The basic principles of religious freedom were preserved in the 1997 [Religion] Law" but ending "The possibility of missionary work was restricted [by the 1997 Law]." A section on "'New' Religions" further argues that the granting of equal rights to religious bodies in Russia in the 1990s caused conflicts, but concludes with the suggestion that "only a tolerant attitude towards dissent, and punishment only for real crimes rather than dissent or heresy" can deliver the ideals of love, wisdom and order as taught by Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism.

Again, however, the complexity of the material in the Book for Teachers makes it difficult to imagine a primary school teacher using it in classes for 10- and 11-year-olds. The Secular Ethics section in particular refers to Cyrenaic philosophy, Eudaimonism, utilitarianism and sociologism. Also, the content of the teachers' book poorly complements that of the actual course. The six textbooks used by pupils are mostly concerned with culture and ethics, barely touching upon Russia's recent historical and current religious situation – the focus of the Book for Teachers.

Previous concern

The impact of pre-2009 versions of Foundations of Orthodox Culture alarmed many non-Orthodox parents and religious leaders.

In Voronezh Region – where Foundations of Orthodox Culture was introduced in May 2007 by agreement with the local Patriarchate diocese – David Perov, the young son of a Protestant pastor, was repeatedly beaten up by classmates on his first day of school for refusing to cross himself during prayers at the school led by a Russian Orthodox priest (see F18News 25 September 2007

In Belgorod Region – which went furthest by introducing compulsory Orthodox Culture classes in every grade – pupils in Belyanka village responded by branding classmates from the evangelical Kingdom of God Church "sectarians" in September 2006. Regional teaching materials seen by Kommersant newspaper the same month recommended that pupils should know various Orthodox prayers by heart and urged the opening of Orthodox prayer rooms in schools (see F18News 25 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1023).

Mukaddas Bibarsov, who heads the Volga Region Spiritual Directorate of Muslims, told Forum 18 in Saratov in 2005 that Foundations of Orthodox Culture course had turned out not to be optional since its local introduction in September 2004: "In practice it is mission, the Christianisation of our children." He also pointed Forum 18 to an April 2005 issue of the Directorate's newspaper in which one Muslim mother recalled finding the following phrases in her 12-year-old's Orthodox Culture exercise book: "As one of the branches of Christianity, Orthodoxy is today considered the most perfect religion"; "the Koran orders the killing of infidels, that is, non-Muslims." The mother also reported being asked by her son before his December 2004 birthday party not to tell classmates that the family is Muslim (see F18News 25 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1022).

Religious propaganda?

The Booklet for Parents introducing the subject doubts that "teachers will try to convert their pupils to one or other religion" in the 34 lessons allotted for the course over two semesters. If this does occur, parents are encouraged to demand the replacement of the teacher concerned.

So far, Forum 18 is aware of only one such case. On 23 April 2013 parents secured the removal of Yelena Cheshuina, headteacher of School No. 15 in the town of Miass (Chelyabinsk Region) after complaining that "religious propaganda" was being taught there in place of Foundations of Orthodox Culture, including the veneration of icons at the school. Cheshuina categorically denied their allegations, according to local television website 1obl.ru.

With the issue privately resolved, parents withdrew their legal suit against the school on 7 May, case records on Miass Municipal Court's website confirm. In July 2013 Cheshuina was appointed head of a local private Orthodox secondary school, Chelyabinsk.ru website reported.

The case demonstrates that the school subject's potential challenge to freedom of religion or belief comes not so much from the official teaching material, but from its interpretation – deliberate or not – by individual schools and even teachers. This makes assessing the situation for Russia as a whole impossible.

No consistency in Krasnoyarsk

Forum 18 found confirmation of this inconsistency on visiting the three Siberian regions of Buryatia, Khakassia and Krasnoyarsk in recent months. Despite these regions' relative proximity to one another, school representatives, religious leaders and parents there reported very different experiences of the subject.

In Krasnoyarsk - the only one of the three regions to participate in the 2009-10 pilot scheme - parents preferred Secular Ethics (58 percent) followed by Foundations of World Religious Cultures (22 percent) and Orthodox Culture (19 percent), according to the pilot scheme results reported by Gazeta.ru (see above). The other three individual religious cultures (Buddhism, Islam and Judaism) together made up only around one percent.

With the subject's introduction across Russia, most parents in Krasnoyarsk Region again chose Secular Ethics or World Religious Cultures, the region's religious affairs official Rashit Rafikov told Forum 18 in Krasnoyarsk on 20 September 2013. He added that no one chose Buddhism and only a handful chose Judaism or Islam, "even though according to some estimates we have five percent Muslims." While stressing that "even if there are just three people [choosing an option], they will still receive separate tuition," Rafikov maintained this had nowhere happened outside Krasnoyarsk city. Other than concerning teachers not being sufficiently qualified – "but that's a general problem" – he also said he had heard no complaints about the subject.

Pastor Vladimir Ashayev of Krasnoyarsk's Christian Life Pentecostal Church confirmed the lack of qualified teachers to Forum 18 on 18 September 2013: "On the ground, nothing is ready." While recognising the subject's potential conflict with freedom of religion or belief, Ashayev also saw possibilities for Protestants, however: "But we have to fit into the framework. Teachers haven't been trained – qualifications need to be raised – so a few people from our church have undertaken to do that so they can teach this subject." While the subject is offered in some schools in Krasnoyarsk city, Pastor Ashayev has also learnt from church members that "it hasn't even been mentioned" in others: "There is no clarity on this issue."

The children of Muslim mother Yelena Gerasimova have not encountered the subject because they are not yet in fourth grade (nine or 10-year-old), she told Forum 18 in Krasnoyarsk on 17 September 2013. However, their teachers have already displayed a positive attitude towards Islam, she added: "In first grade [7 years] the teacher spoke about the Church, and when it was clear our children

didn't understand she invited them to tell the class about their faith and the mosque." A lawyer, Gerasimova is facing charges of religious "extremism" which she strongly denies (see F18News 2 December 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1902).

Gerasimova's local Mufti Gayaz Fatkullin – who enjoys good relations with the Krasnoyarsk authorities – praised the subject as a "lifeline": "If the implementation and understanding are correct, it will prove a great chance to preserve peace in future." However, speaking to Forum 18 in Krasnoyarsk on 18 September 2013, he also had reservations: "Some officials and teachers see this subject as a way to further their own personal ambitions and worldview, and it's a rare teacher who can remain objective. He could be asked, 'Is it true that Christ rose from the dead?' It wouldn't be right to duck the question, or to give a one-sided answer."

While his son is also too young for the subject, Mufti Fatkullin told Forum 18 that he strongly prefers World Religious Cultures over Foundations of Islamic Culture: "I don't want somebody insufficiently educated to read lectures on Islam to my child in school. Even if the teacher doesn't instil a particular viewpoint, he won't be able to say anything and my son will be confused. He already studies here in the mosque from good, qualified people." On the other hand, remarked the mufti, "I do think it right to give a child general knowledge on World Religious Cultures. That gives a wider view on the situation in the world."

Khakassia: "What was the point of us choosing?"

In the neighbouring republic of Khakassia, Forum 18 found varying experience in schools even among Protestants. While Pastor Aleksandr Prus of Glorification Pentecostal Church has not encountered the school subject, he finds schools generally positive about Protestants. "We go into schools and talk about the dangers of drugs, promote a healthy lifestyle," the pastor told Forum 18 in on 10 September 2013. "They are glad for this to happen." The Church's relations with local officials were previously mixed; while winning praise for its successful Reformation youth ice-hockey team, Glorification was forced to demolish its own worship building in June 2007 (see F18News 30 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1040).

A Protestant local teacher who is not teaching the subject, Olga Kozlova told Forum 18 on 12 September 2013 that she knew of two schools in Abakan - the Khakassian capital – where Foundations of World Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics are offered: "The schools are inclined to favour Secular Ethics, in order to avoid disagreements between different groups due to religious affiliation." Seeing that the World Religious Cultures option includes only Orthodox Christianity while Secular Ethics is about "the rules of behaviour, good manners", Catholic and Protestant parents in these schools have opted for Secular Ethics, she added.

Also in Abakan, the daughter of Pastor Pavel Zayakin of St Luke's Lutheran Church is taking classes in the subject in a third school, he told Forum 18 on 10 September 2013. While the Zayakins had requested Foundations of World Religious Cultures, they were later told only two pupils had done so. Since the remaining 28 opted for Foundations of Orthodox Culture, the whole class is now following that module, Pastor Zayakin told Forum 18: "The headteacher also explained that, 'We're living in an Orthodox country.' So what was the point of us choosing?"

Telephoned on 11 September, a spokesperson at the Abakan school attended by Pastor Zayakin's daughter declined to comment to Forum 18.

At Abakan City Education Department on 12 September, its assistant director Galina Ozerova repeatedly insisted to Forum 18 that, "We do the maximum to make the choice available and to grant parents' requests" in each of the city's 24 schools. In practice, she continued, parents prefer Secular Ethics, Foundations of Orthodox Culture or Foundations of World Religious Cultures, with approximately 50, 30 and 20 percent choosing these options respectively.

Ozerova also repeatedly insisted to Forum 18 that the subject "is not the foundations of faith, but of culture – I don't wear a cross but I live in Russia, so I must know about Orthodox culture." Adding that, "There are many Muslims in Russia, and so I must know about that too," she also expected that Catholicism and Protestantism would be studied as part of the World Religious Cultures course: "We must study the diversity of the world."

Breaking down barriers in Buryatia

East of Lake Baikal in Buryatia Republic, Forum 18 interviewed a teacher of the subject in the capital, Ulan-Ude, on 7 October 2013. At the junior department of the city's School No. 3, Yelena Kostareva estimated that 150 nine or 10-year-old fourth-grade pupils took up the subject in 2012 and 120 in 2013. Despite Buryatia's reputation as a Buddhist centre, however, she added that no one had chosen the individual course on Buddhist Culture, or indeed on Orthodox, Islamic or Jewish Culture. Kostareva thought this was typical for Buryatia, as she had heard of only a handful of pupils following Foundations of either Buddhist or Orthodox Culture in other districts of the republic.

While parents of pupils at School No. 3 were asked to choose "in principle" from the six modules, the school was sent textbooks only for Secular Ethics and Foundations of World Religious Cultures, Kostareva told Forum 18. The teachers therefore came to an agreement with parents for half of the pupils to study each module: "We just explained that these were the textbooks we got." The textbooks used are those examined by Forum 18 (see above).

Despite not being able to offer individual faith options, there were no objections from parents, Kostareva continued; half wanted World Religious Cultures, some wanted Secular Ethics and a quarter to a third "didn't care at all". The smaller number of pupils in 2013 allowed greater flexibility, she told Forum 18, with over half able to follow Secular Ethics.

As in the other regions visited by Forum 18, Kostareva attended training courses on the subject at Buryatia's state-run Institute for Raising Qualifications. Guest specialists in the relevant training included clerical and other representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), Old Believers, Muslims, Jews and Buddhists, she recalled. The main co-ordinator, a historian from the historically shamanist Buryat exclave in neighbouring Irkutsk Region, was a follower of shamanism, she added. The training thus included elements on Old Belief and shamanism, even though these faiths barely feature in the official teaching material.

Kostareva described to Forum 18 how she has taken her pupils following the World Religious Cultures module on excursions to see various local religious communities. In Targabatai village, an Old Believer priest explained his faith, "not by saying 'this is the correct way', but by saying 'we do things this way, they do it another way'." Kostareva acknowledged, however, that the priest also "gently" criticised non-Old Believer icons for not being handmade, and that pupils were invited to light candles in the Old Believer church. At the Buddhist temple in Atsagat village, pupils put their hands together in the attitude of Buddhist prayer and sprinkled rice in the Buddhist devotional manner, she continued, stressing that this was voluntary.

Kostareva's pupils studying World Religious Cultures are in fact already familiar with religious practice because there are many observant families in Buryatia, she explained to Forum 18: "They learn it in families – I didn't teach them (..) this wasn't some kind of revelation to the children." Classes are diverse, she added, with pupils from practising Buddhist, Old Believer and Muslim families, as well as a shamanist family originally from Yakutia (Sakha) Republic.

Pointing out that her pupils studying World Religious Cultures choose projects on faiths other than their own, Kostareva also showed Forum 18 pictures drawn as part of a project on houses of worship. A boy of Buryat Buddhist background had drawn a mosque, while ethnic Russian children had written about local Buddhist temples. In Kostareva's view, the aim of the subject is to remove barriers: "So they are not afraid of what goes on [in unfamiliar houses of worship]. Many had been afraid to go there – the Buryats were thinking, 'Why should I go into that church?' At the moment a lot is said about Islam being a frightening religion, blowing things up, but as Askerov [a Muslim pupil] said in his presentation, 'my religion does not promote that'."

Celebrating demons

Kostareva's approach – clearly influenced by her personal values as well as the cultural diversity of her local area – illustrates that the subject may be very variously interpreted on the ground. Yet schools in urban centres are not necessarily more likely to respect freedom of religion or belief by teaching Foundations of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics as intended at federal level, Forum 18 notes.

In Moscow, Orthodox parents who wish to remain anonymous for fear of repercussions on their children have told Forum 18 that their suburban school has already cancelled tuition of the subject on the pretext of saving money. In 2012 - the only year that Secular Ethics and Foundations of Orthodox Culture was taught at the school - six pupils followed the first module and 22, mostly nominally Orthodox, the second. The subject's cancellation has not upset the practising Orthodox parents, they told Forum 18 on 26 November 2013. As the teacher who taught Foundations of Orthodox Culture was indifferent to Orthodoxy, they explained, their children described the subject as "nasty" and "phony".

Of more concern to these practising Orthodox parents, however, was a different teacher's promotion of Halloween at the school each 31 October. (In recent years school celebrations of Halloween and St Valentine's Day have been widely criticised by some Russian Orthodox as an alien, Western practice.) When young pupils at the Moscow school wore demon costumes for the 2012 Halloween celebration – of which Forum 18 has seen a photograph – the Orthodox parents complained to the headteacher. Despite this, the celebration was repeated on the same date with the same costumes in 2013 – but the teacher announced at the last minute that they would be celebrating not Halloween, but the "festival of Russian devilry [prazdnik russkoi nechistoi sily]". (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's surveys of the general state of freedom of religion or belief in Russia at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1722, and of the dramatic decline in religious freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724.

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis <http://www.sova-center.ru>, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation, is at F18News 19 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468.

A personal commentary by Irina Budkina, Editor of the <http://www.samstar.ucoz.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, is at F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at

<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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